

A CHILD OF THE REVOLUTION

(*Anak Revolusi* by M. Balfas)

Translated by Alan M. Stevens

His mother had been a widow for a long time. This had never bothered him. He knew that his mother was still beautiful and that there were many men who wanted her. He had often gotten a "gift," money or clothing, from the men who wanted to taste the sweetness of life with his mother. He accepted all those "gifts" as just tricks. Only his younger brother didn't understand; he was still happy when people tricked him. His mother existed only for him and his brother. Outsiders mustn't disturb their enjoyment. He had made this decision a long time ago; and if at first it was weak, it now had become firm in his heart. In fact, his uncle, about whom he had formerly boasted to his friends, now had no more worth to him. He wanted to become a father to his brother and a hero in his mother's household.

Early in the morning Ama was already out doing business with the Indian or British soldiers and it was night before he came home. Every day there had to be some profit coming in--sometimes a lot, sometimes a little--but always more than that of his own friends. He paid no attention to his mother's anger, because he knew that she needed the profits of his trading and he was considered an extraordinary child. This satisfied him. He felt he was already grown-up even though he was only fourteen.

He would buy in the morning, sell at noon, and both buy and sell in the late afternoon. When it was dark, it was only when he was left alone on the street that he wanted to head home. He exchanged pens, watches, and cameras for cloth or canned goods and often when he didn't have anything to exchange, he would buy them with NICA* money. This was his daily work, for a while in the city, sometimes in Tanah-lapang Singa, and not infrequently he spent the whole day in Tanjung Priok.** There was money for him wherever there were barracks.

It was ten o'clock at night. He had just come home. His brother was asleep and only his mother waited up nervously. Jakarta was still not safe; the sound of shooting could still be heard from time to time.

Tonight he had a secret which weighed heavily on him, a secret which his mother must not discover.

A soldier would only sell him some white cloth if he would find him an "old lady" [prostitute] first. It was difficult for him to refuse the soldier's request because the stakes were pretty high. A

* Netherlands Indies Civil Administration.

** Jakarta's harbor.

watch worth Rp. 500 (Japanese) was to be exchanged for a roll of white cloth worth Rp. 2500. He felt unsure because he knew that his mother wouldn't like him to do something like this. It was already evening. He hadn't made much money yet. Finally, he uttered the word "O.K.," followed by a deep breath. He told the soldier to wait under a shady tree behind the barracks and he went to look for the bait.

He didn't have to look far. He knew the place, along the railroad tracks at Gambir, by the side of the road under the shade of the lined-up trees. When he got to the place and came across a "vagrant" who was putting on her makeup, suddenly he couldn't open his mouth. Not that he wasn't used to speaking to "vagrants." In fact he liked to kid around with them, sometimes even taunt them. But now a "vagrant" had to help him do something which he felt wasn't right.

Ama kept silent. Was he afraid? He could do a lot of things which were even more dangerous. Once he had been chased by a Sikh whom he had tricked with a broken watch. He had run as fast as he could clutching the 1500 rupiah. He almost gave up, because he was afraid of being shot; but finally he got away. He realized that victory lies in the final seconds.

"You want some money! There's a soldier. . . ."

He didn't know what to say. He had to think before he could finish the sentence. Thank God he was answered:

"What? Ya wanna give me some money?"

Suddenly Ama became his usual clever self again.

"Yeah, follow me, there's a rich soldier, a push-over!"

"Is it far?"

"Nah, near by, behind the barracks."

His difficult job had gotten to this point, but now there was another matter which demanded more care. Ama had to watch out not to be tricked by the soldier. He made a quick decision.

"I'll go ahead. You follow, OK?"

"Go 'head, I'll follow."

Tinah, who three years ago was still a village virgin hoping to seek her fortune in the city, now made her livelihood by dressing up at the side of the road. Her hairdo, which she had fixed up with great pains, was now finished; all she had to do was put on her powder. She took a paper package out from behind the cement block which served as her dressing table. She opened it and stuck her hand in the little bit of powder which remained. Quickly she applied it to her cheek. But as she was about to run after Ama who had gone ahead, a voice suddenly cried out.

Saiyah, her friend and companion, came out of the darkness. This time she was prettier than Tinah. A red flower was stuck in her hair. Even though it wasn't light enough to see, its fragrance was strong enough to smell.

Tinah grabbed her friend's hand and pulled her along.

"No! I'm gonna wait for the *keling** here. If we do it in his place, he won't wanna pay," said Saiyah happily.

Without paying attention to what her friend said, Tinah kept on pulling at Saiyah's hand while running after Ama who was already almost out of sight.

Two short white skirts could be seen moving, drawn along by the darkness.

The street was quiet. Once in a while a jeep drove by crazily. The faster the white skirts moved, the faster Ama moved his legs. He had to get there first for the 500.

"Yes . . . yes . . . OK . . . OK," Ama shouted approaching the soldier who was squatting under a tree and smoking a cigarette.

"OK?" the soldier greeted him with pleasure.

"Yes . . . ," Ama said again, pointing behind him.

"Whore . . . where watch, you give me whore."

The soldier took the watch which Ama pushed forward and carefully examined it again with his flashlight; he was afraid that the watch wasn't the one he had looked at before.

"OK," the word came out of a row of teeth as white as rice, together with some cigarette smoke. Slowly he took a thick package out from behind the tree. Ama's heart was pounding when he saw the huge package. It was hard for him to hide his nervousness.

"O . . . you left me behind." Tinah's anger was mixed with laughter as she slapped Ama's shoulder.

Ama quickly took the package out of the soldier's hands and in a second he had disappeared into the darkness.

"Ama . . . Ama" The soldier called out.

He ran and ran and didn't look back. His heart kept on pounding. The voice calling him became louder, but he just kept on running.

Tinah lost out to Saiyah. The soldier had picked her friend, apparently because of the red flower. Tinah knew she wasn't going to get any money so she ran after Ama.

She guessed the package was valuable and she could grab it out of the boy's hands.

Tinah was fat and she couldn't run as fast as Ama.

"Ama . . . Ama" she yelled, imitating the soldier.

* A derogatory word for Indian.

Her voice was piercing, quite different from the other's booming voice. He looked back but a stone tripped him and made him stumble.

He got up quickly. His foot hurt. He rubbed and rubbed at the sore spot. Eh . . . there was something wet. "Blood," he thought.

He was about to burst into tears when Tinah tried to grab the thing out of his hands. Just as Tinah's hands fell on the thing he was clutching, Ama's teeth bit into the thieving hands.

Because he really was biting down hard, Tinah pulled her hand back and this gave Ama the chance to start running again. Tinah snatched at Ama's shirt, but in vain.

"Pig," Tinah moaned, looking at the place he had bitten. His teeth had bitten deep into her flesh. Grumbling, she went back to where her friend Saiyah was standing.

This event made a deep impression on Ama. All night long he felt as if he were still under the shady tree. It was as if he could see that mysterious thing that had happened. There was something which drew him to dark happenings. Finally he felt as if he were being chased. He ran . . . and then fell.

It was morning. He didn't get up at once. His body felt weak. His mother's cold hand touched his brow before he became conscious.

"Are you sick, 'Ma?" his mother asked. She felt worried that there might be something really wrong with her son's health. Last night he had talked wildly in his sleep, and his body was hot.

"No, mom," Ama answered and then got up from the cot.

Actually he preferred to stay silent and doze and listen to those inner voices which had much to say about what had happened last night.

But he was afraid his mother would find out his secret, and he acted as if nothing was wrong. If his mother found out his secret, he wouldn't be allowed to trade any more; he would leave the world he loved. As he went to the bathroom there kept flashing through his mind:

The black half-naked body of the Indian soldier in the gaps between cheese-white British bodies moving along the road--the clear sky pierced by ships' masts--the eye of a thief in the bushes when hiding the stolen cans of biscuits, delicious oatmeal eaten with a glass of iced syrup on the scorching sea shore--all of this was alive within him. As if it were not possible to separate himself from all this. This was the world he was familiar with. This was the eternal which he knew and which was in his consciousness.

But besides this there was something else which gave him satisfaction. The realization that it was *he* who supported his mother's household--that it was *he* who paid for his mother's and brother's needs when his mother could no longer go to work because times had changed so greatly, and that it was *he* who was the source of strength and skill in their life.

He felt satisfied living like this, even though his body was getting thinner and thinner.

Only . . . he couldn't understand his mother's dark glance, the hoarse voice of the woman he loved. Maybe his mother was sad because her son was working too hard for her. Why should there be sadness when there is enjoyment . . . ?

The clock on the glass-enclosed front porch struck six times. Ama had woken up already. He followed the ticking of the clock from the cot where he was lying. It was like his heart. If that was so, he too was a clock. If the clock stopped ticking, it could be fixed; if his heart didn't beat any longer, he would die, people said. Strange . . . and funny too.

"Abdulgaffar," flashed into his lazily dreaming mind. He got up, quickly opened the box which was on top of the bedside table. He took out three watches and a pen; he wrapped them carefully in a grimy handkerchief and then put them into the pocket of his shorts. From his back pocket he pulled out some paper money which he then slipped under the pillow on the cot.

"For today's shopping," he said to himself.

His mother hadn't finished praying yet. She could still be heard inside reciting the Koran. His brother hadn't gotten up yet and so it was still very quiet.

Carefully, so that his mother wouldn't hear him, he turned the key to the glass doors. Suddenly the voice inside stopped reciting. He took a look inside. It was very quiet. But just as he pulled the door open his mother called out: "Ama . . . come here for a minute." He was annoyed that his mother knew he was going out. She probably had some more misplaced advice. A big man like him still being given advice!

He went up to his mother who was still on the prayer mat. Ama stood in front of his mother with a sad expression on his face.

"Wash up and eat first before you go out," his mother said slowly. His mother's face was so sweet, encircled by her clean white prayer-shawl. It looked even more clearly like a betel leaf.

"It takes too long, mom, Abdulgaffar can't wait."

"If he's gone already, there's still the train to Priok." His mother kept looking down.

"You can't enter the harbor area by train. It's easy with Abdulgaffar's truck. The public can't get into the harbor area."

His mother lifted her face--the unhappiness on her son's face made her stop trying to prevent him from going.

"I'm going, mom, OK?"

There was no answer and a moment later his mother nodded yes.

It was five minutes after six.

He saw his brother leaning on the door of the bedroom where his mother was praying, rubbing his eyes. Ama wanted to get by, but the edge of his pants was tugged. "What do you want?"

"Money for a snack, just one rupiah. Mother is really sour, not the way she usually is."

Ama pulled the money out of his pocket again and gave his brother half a rupiah.

"Another half . . . !" his brother whined. Ama didn't pay any attention to him and ran out.

When he got to Molenvliet Timur, where he waited for Abdulgaffar and his friends to go by, he realized that he still had a lot of time. "Another quarter of an hour," he said.

Without thinking about it he took off his shirt and pants and in a second he jumped into the Ciliwung River.

The water felt cold. He planned to swim across the river twice and then come out. Abdulgaffar's biscuits and Players would taste even better after taking a bath. When he got to the other side or Molenvliet Barat, he saw Dulah walking along looking like he was going to school. He had a new shirt and pants on and he was carrying a school bag.

"What? School? It's started again?" it occurred to him.

"Dul . . . Dulah . . . !" he shouted. Dulah looked around for the sound. Ama swam out to the middle and waved his hand. At the side he had been hidden by a high wall. Dulah could see him now, and he went out onto the bridge which arched over the river.

"Where are you going?" Ama said when Dulah, who was just nine years old, looked down holding onto the railing of the bridge.

"Where do you think, to school! School's opened again starting today. Where's Saleh? Is he going back to school or not?"

Dulah, his brother's classmate, looked very happy. His arrogance could easily be seen. People said that his father had gotten a large amount of money and a yellow card. His father had joined NICA. Ama remembered this and his hatred flared up. "He probably thinks I can't afford to send my brother to school. Damned NICA dog," he said to himself.

Ama stopped bathing. As he was putting on his shirt, Dulah came up to him. "It's not enough for him to brag from far away." He felt agitated again.

"They say that you now pay for school with NICA money. If that's so, my father wants to help you."

"What?" Ama blurted out. He almost socked him. "Who do you mean by 'you'?"

"I don't mean you, 'Ma, but anyone who can't afford it."

"Tell your father I can still buy and sell him." And he took a lot of money out of his back pocket. "Here's 200 red rupiahs and 2000 Japanese. Your father only gets charity from the Dutch."

Dulah didn't feel up to fighting with Ama and he turned around and walked firmly away.

The sound of a line of trucks could be heard. His annoyance quickly disappeared when he saw that it was Abdulgaffar's convoy that was coming. He quickly crossed over so as to be closer. The first one passed by and the second and third but Abdulgaffar didn't appear. He was worried. The seventh, eighth and ninth . . . and he still wasn't there. He felt dizzy following the trucks that passed in front of him. Finished . . . all of them had passed, only in the distance there was one more moving slowly. Maybe that was he?

His eyes were fixed on the slowly turning wheels. All of a sudden he heard Abdulgaffar's familiar laugh.

"The rat, he was teasing me," Ama softly cursed. As fast as a squirrel he climbed on the truck, paying no attention to his friend's greeting. "Let's go . . . let's go . . ." The truck moved quickly to catch up with its companions which were already far ahead. Ama still had a chance to look back. A voice was shouting: "Watch out. I'll tell my father on you!" Dulah screamed his anger while shaking his fist. Ama smiled bitterly.

By the time Abdulgaffar's truck slowed down because it had joined up with the others, Ama was sitting on a box facing the main road which he had just left. In his left hand he held a biscuit, in his right hand a Player which smelled delicious.

All his irritations--all his various little problems--he left them behind in the road together with the cigarette smoke.

Today Ama came home early. At eleven in the morning he was already on the road leading to his house. He looked very tired and his walk was unsteady. There was something sad in his appearance. What was the matter?

Today was the day. . . .

The last of the Indian and English troops were leaving Indonesia and Abdulgaffar had to part from his friend. Ama was being left by the man who had done so much for him. There was a sad parting under a tree in front of the Sub Area in Gambir. Ama forgot his position; he became a small child again and he was glad to be hugged by Abdulgaffar who was also deeply moved. There were some tears shed. After that it became quiet again.

The convoy of trucks headed for Priok but this time Ama couldn't go along. The trucks left and he headed home.

He got to Harmoni before he realized there was something in his pocket. An enveloping feeling of surprise and sadness disturbed him when he saw that the watch that Abdulgaffar had bought from him a half year ago was now in his pocket. Recently Abdulgaffar hadn't had anything; canned goods were hard to get, not to speak of rolls of cloth. But Ama had given him a white silk bag embroidered with the name of Allah in red Arabic letters and on the other side the names Abdulgaffar and Muhamad (Ama) as a souvenir, and he had to be repaid. Because Abdulgaffar didn't have anything except the watch he was wearing, he quietly slipped Ama the watch when he embraced him.

That silk bag had been made and embroidered by Ama's mother and was meant to hold a holy Koran. Every time Abdulgaffar would read the Koran he would always remember a child in Indonesia and that child would also always remember his kindness.

Two memories met in that silk bag.

Jakarta was no longer the city it had been a year ago when the Indian soldiers were still there. The situation was becoming normal. People were busy talking about the problems of life in the city. People had to bow to regulations. Little by little life outside the law was being pushed back to the jungle. And Ama, a child who had lived in the revolution, felt the cruel blow of that organization. He constantly cursed law and order. He realized his weakness now and almost no longer dared to say: "I am a father to my brother and a hero in my mother's house." His mother had gone back to work a long time ago. Formerly only he used to leave the house early in the morning, now both he and his mother left. And his mother's income was more than his.

His uncle often came to the house and spoke to his mother for hours. Ama wasn't allowed to hear what they were discussing. He had become a child again.

One day his mother called him. His uncle, who was sitting facing his mother, also motioned to him.

"Ama . . . you can't go on like this. You're still a child. It's not time for you to go to work yet. I let you go before because I was forced to and anyway the schools weren't open yet. But now the situation has changed. Children your age are pursuing an education so that they can be educated people later. Don't you want to be a respected person, 'Ma?'"

"Your mother's right. You have to go to school. Don't waste your time," his uncle interrupted.

Ama couldn't bear to listen long to these words which hurt him so. He felt tremendously humiliated. He was especially angry at his uncle.

"Don't waste your time," he kept repeating his uncle's sentence to himself. He turned around and walked out paying no attention to his uncle who was calling him.

"Now you put on lots of airs but before you abandoned us and who helped my mother then? Who bought Saleh new clothes for school? Who gave him money?" He couldn't hold back his tears; he was going to cry.

Fearfully, Saleh, Ama's brother, came up to him and whispered: "'Ma, do you know why mother has changed toward you? Uncle has talked her into marrying him."

Ama's thoughts became even darker when he heard what his brother said. He went out to the road and sat on a rock looking at the road. He looked up, up at the clear sky.

The sky is bright--ships' masts everywhere--smoke waving softly.

The smell of sweat from soldiers' shirts--the eyes of a thief--a can of cheese. . . .

Steps on the gas, dust spurts from the truck . . . syrup and ice and a biscuit and in his hand a roll of unbleached cotton.

Tomorrow it starts again.

The sky is bright--the ships' masts everywhere.